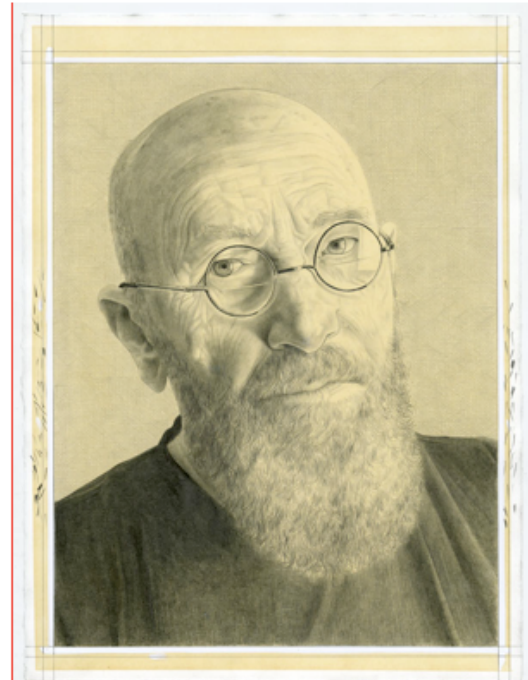
THE BROOKLYN RAIL
CRITICAL PERSPECTIVES ON ARTS, POLITICS, AND CULTURE

RAFAEL FERRER with Barry Schwabsky

July 15th, 2013

On the occasion of Rafael Ferrer's participation in the exhibition When Attitudes Become Form: Bern 1969/Venice 2013, curated by Germano Celant in dialogue with Thomas Demand and Rem Koolhaas and presented by the Fondazione Prada at Ca' Corner della Regina in Venice (through November 3)—revisiting the original exhibition f the same name, curated by Harald Szeemann at the Bern Kunsthalle in 1969—Barry Schwabsky met with the Puerto Rican-born musician-turned-artist to find out what it was like to re-encounter his own younger self.



`Portrait of the artist. By Phong Bui.

Barry Schwabsky (Rail): You have just come back from the reprise of When Attitudes Become Form in Venice; tell me about that.

Rafael Ferrer: You mean the experience or the exhibition or what?

Rail: Well, start with the exhibition.

Ferrer: Miuccia Prada asked me a question, if I found the exhibition confusing. And I said not at all; that I found it curious. Because no matter how hard anybody tries to redo something that was done, especially, I mean how many years are we talking about? From 1969 to 2013, so 44 years ago. The thing is that the palazzo itself is an entity with grand rooms—some with frescos—that relates to Venice itself. So the juxtaposition of the architecture of the palazzo with that work was significantly different from the way it appeared in Bern in 1969, not only because the culture that created Venice is so different from the culture that made the Bern Kunsthalle, but to me the thing that I perceived immediately was that there were some works that really had a lot of energy. And then there were a lot of works that were just kind of there. They didn't seem to connect with any actual thought that was alive that I could detect.

Rail: What made the difference?

Ferrer: There was something curious about that period, because there was almost a fetish with hardware, meaning you could really do a show by simply going to the hardware store and selecting things that no one would ever have thought of using. Except if you go further back, of course. Not only did Marcel Duchamp find things in a hardware store, but Morton Livingston Schamberg found

that wonderful piece that's in the Philadelphia Museum called "God" (1917) and it's simply the plumbing trap of a sink. To my general impression, the things in the show that really seemed to me to be completely alive, in the moment we're living right now, were the Italian things that came to be known as Arte Povera. There is a warmth, not romanticism, but rather a kind of intensely sensual aspect to those works. There were also works by Bruce Nauman that were fantastic, they have stood the test of time; they seem wonderfully mysterious: a neon piece and then this odd, very fragile shape of plaster, both a suggestion of a body part. There were two pieces by Eva Hesse that were absolutely stunning. One of them, made out of that rubbery latex, had to be redone because the original piece had disintegrated.

Rail: What about re-experiencing, re-doing your own work?

Ferrer: Well, you see, that's a great question to ask because I am really not an artist who is represented in the show by a strictly recreated work. When Harold Szeemann was preparing the original show, he met me at the Chelsea Hotel—I was living in Philadelphia then, and came into town—we sat down, ordered some wine, and he asked, "What do you think you would like to do?" And I said, "I've been working with chain link fence and I would like to send you a roll of 3 foot high by 50 foot long, chain link. But the configuration of the chain link is not static, and it's not dogmatic—it's not like I'm proposing a particular sculpture or shape, only a material and its possibilities. It adjusts to the space that's available." So, the thing was that in Bern, it was placed outdoors on the grass, its length twisted into a kind of spiral. In Venice, at the Prada Foundation there was almost no outdoor space, only a small courtyard where they had placed a work by another artist, which made it impossible for me to redo this long piece outside. The space they offered me was the end of a long room on the top floor of the palazzo. My wife Bunny and I had done certain things with that particular roll of chain link. We tried one, and it didn't work for reasons of space. Then we tried another one, which was to double, in other words, to fold the chain link in half and then make the top be like a spine, and allow the bottom to splay out, so it created this inverted V shape. But more important was the fact that I wanted it to be dynamic, to allow it to take its own shape. I said to Germano and the installers that we had to maneuver the piece to fit the narrowness of the room, curving the spine, which created a snake form. So I called it "Culebra," which is snake in Spanish, and also refers to the island of Culebra, which is one of the two notorious islands used by the U.S. Navy to practice a form of World War II warfare that was already obsolete.

Rail: So basically you made a new piece out of the same materials that you made the first time, but it's material that you haven't been habituated to using for many years. And in general your work has metamorphosed tremendously since those years, and it's gone through so many different stages.

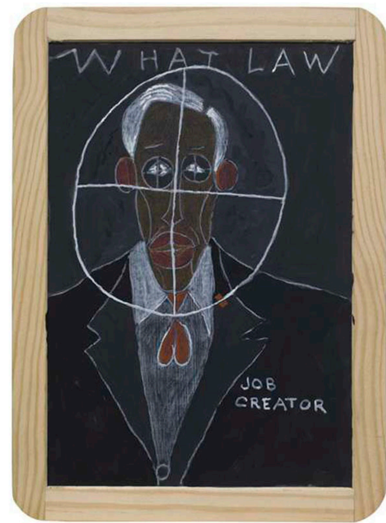
Ferrer: This is really something that has become clear to me. My earlier life as a musician created in my psyche a sense that what you do is dictated by the needs of the moment, all within a repertoire. So I can look back at the work of the '60s and I can see now how I can make that work effective. It's not about repetition, but it's about the challenge of the moment.

Rail: So you feel like you can reinterpret yourself continuously and have a new view on things?

Ferrer: Absolutely. The psychology of the art world and the art market are so engrained with repetition, making a steady, absolutely, consistently identifiable product much like the auto industry. That has never been the impetus of my work. I have always believed that the doing is what is exciting. The challenge of where it's going to occur. Indoors, outdoors, small space, big space—all those considerations have always been a part of my work, as they had when I made installations. When I returned to painting, believe me, those paintings were all about spaces—my attraction to odd

spaces with weird light and strange people. A dear friend and a respected academic scholar, Edward J. Sullivan, said that perhaps I have too many ideas for my own good. But the thing about it is—how can someone determine what is good for someone else? I don't think in poetry you can have too many ideas. Only when you are consistent, as one does when refining a product, do you have to narrow your perspective.

Rail: Well, we've also seen though, how artists, and maybe poets too, maybe it's a kind of Zen influence, but how they can have fewer and fewer ideas and reach a certain point of absolute innocence regained. I mean, an artist like Agnes Martin was never trying to have more ideas, she was trying to shed her ideas and get to some very pure experience.



Rafael Ferrer, details of "Contraband," 2011. In the collection of Randy Shull and Hedy Fischer Collection of Contemporary Art. Gouache on blackboard 11 1/2 × 8 1/2 inches each. Photo: Guy Mamay.

Ferrer: I don't disagree with that, again, I have—in my life as a musician—known spirits that are very low-key and contemplative, in the way that Agnes Martin's work is. Although my temperament—which is in the end, where my work comes from—is not in tune with that. It doesn't mean, for instance, that I can walk past a Piet Mondrian and not stop and marvel at the visual, tactile aspect of the work. Your point about Agnes Martin can't be denied, that mystical element, that silence must come from her temperament, it is natural to her.

Rail: You're a drummer. I suppose that "contemplative percussionist" would be a contradiction in terms. [Laughs.] Whereas the wind players have, more possibly, a long breath.

Ferrer: And the strings also.

Rail: A minute ago when you were talking about your paintings you said the space is strange, the light is strange, and the people are strange. And it was interesting for me to hear you say that, because as a viewer I do experience the people as strange, but then I've always wondered whether they are also strange to the person who painted them. And I remember your very eloquent letter to the New York Times about a review that Roberta Smith had written about one of your shows, in which she was critical of what she called a "faux-primitivism." In your response you said, "They can call the people in the paintings natives or they can call them inhabitants of this place or the other, but I call them neighbors." So who are your neighbors, people who are familiar or people who are strange?

Ferrer: Well, they are familiar and strange, because I am totally aware that we are not operating at the same wavelength. Meaning, how they interpret me does not really concern me. There is a mutual curiosity expressed in conversation, a back and forth I have with them, whether

while painting them or in daily life. But it's the strangeness that attracts me. The most problematic thing is familiarity. If I'm totally familiar with something, it's no longer interesting.

Rail: Which probably brings us back to why you've changed your work so much over the years. Maybe you have to change because you get too familiar with things.

Ferrer: There are many reasons. The last time we spoke, I commented to you, if you're a musician, well, at what level are you entering the music world? Are you entering at the classical level with an academic background in music theory, trained to play certain instruments, able to interpret the whole canon of classical European music, so-called. Well, that is one type of musician. But then there are the musicians that come from the street, the self-taught, intrinsically talented individuals. This is the level at which many involved in jazz in the United States and Afro-Caribbean music from the islands come from. Which is why they both give a tremendous importance to improvisation. It's really a high-stakes activity with great demands, and a discipline that can't be practiced casually. So what happens is that the world often sees them as quite implacable. This aggressive, in-your-face energy runs contrary to the liberal establishment, which to a great extent dominates the art world in the United States, as well.

"My earlier life as a musician created in my psyche a sense that what you do is dictated by the needs of the moment, all within a repertoire."

Rail: Which is also quite implacable.

Ferrer: Oh, absolutely, but there is a lot of pretense in their denial. The world that I'm talking about is a world that was defined by the so-called hipness of the protagonist. The same occurred in jazz as it did in Afro-Cuban music. They were concurrent, coexisting in 1950s New York. I remember playing at the Palladium Ballroom with a group that I had played with quite a while. Frank "Machito" Grillo and his huge, fantastic orchestra were playing opposite us. Unforgettable! And one evening, I saw Dizzy Gillespie walk through the crowd, get on the bandstand, and sit on the floor by the trumpet section, legs crossed, just to listen. It's not just that it was spectacular, but it shows a generosity that doesn't acknowledge a cultural difference and that is oblivious to an idea of his public image—who's better, who's superior—all of these things that I have found so negative in the art world. The art world spends almost all of its time including or excluding. It's undeniable that there was an incredible bond between Mario Bauzá, Machito's musical director and trumpeter, and Dizzy Gillespie. Dizzy was the one who asked Mario about getting him an Afro-Cuban percussionist. That's how the beginning of this exodus from Cuba to New York began. Chano Pozo was the first to come to work with Dizzy. Neither could speak the other's language, but regardless, he completely blew Dizzy away, with his capacity to interpret things right off, from the word, "Go." Meaning all Dizzy had to say was—bing bing ba bom, bi bing ba ba, bi bing ba ba, and Chano would take it and immediately start playing and it was unbelievable. This is what I'm talking about. Going back to the art world, what I found from the start was that the overwhelming majority of the participants were square beyond belief. And this is one of the reasons why I have never felt at ease in that world. There are all kinds of coded things. I know at school they teach networking—which is just a flimflam word for suck ass, don't criticize, be nice to everybody, be a great hypocrite, never tell anybody what you really believe or think. Complete opposite of the world of music. I have witnessed a bandleader stop the music and tell a particular musician to get off the bandstand. And that's it. And then someone else would come and they would start again, no explanation given, none needed. What is that, that phrase by Clint Eastwood that has so much resonance beyond the movies? "A man's got to know his limitations." You can't teach that in art school. That is something you have to have inside of you. And what is it that energizes one's understanding of one's limitations?

Well, introspection for one. The capacity to understand those that have true genius and can exercise it at a level that you are not yet proficient enough to do. And the other one is that you have to have a great sense of dignity. Because you're not going to display yourself just to make a spectacle for the sake of being famous.

Rail: When I try to understand what you mean by hip and square, I have to speculate a little bit about it, partly because I don't come from that world. If Chano Pozo is hip because he was so fast on the uptake, then to be square means not knowing how to take a hint—how to run with it and develop it. The square needs to have a kind of coded system to tell them how to receive an idea and what to do with it.

Rafael Ferrer, "Cortijo Tres Veces," 2012. Oil on board, 12 × 36". Photo: Guy Mamay.

Ferrer: That is absolutely true, which brought about multiple thoughts while listening to you. Pablo Picasso met Paul Klee. You couldn't have two more diametrically opposed individuals in their work and in their being. When Picasso came back to Paris, he was asked, "What about Paul Klee?" He answered, "Il est un petit Pascal"—Blaise Pascal the writer of the Pensées. That was an incredible insight into his work. When he saw Klee, he understood that the economy of means in his work was so eloquent. That's super sharp. That's what hipness is really all about. It's not about just one way of doing things. To be proficient is to have the authenticity that makes it possible to connect with other stuff. The problem with the academic is that it always depends on a structure that is based on belief, like religion. It's not based on intuition, or feeling, it's based on belief.

Rail: People tried to make cubism into a system and a belief. You've said to me before that cubism had the most profound engagement with space in modern art. What do you get from cubism that is not in the methodology of cubism?

Ferrer: Cubism is a play of space and form, existing with disdain for the laws of proportions and perspective. So out of that, you can see in someone who was never called a cubist, like Max Beckmann—you see a greater capacity to make space dynamic than you do with the third and fourth generation of cubists, who were still essentially playing off Georges Braque and Picasso and Juan Gris. But in Beckmann you see something astonishing, something new, I mean something powerful, in my opinion. As much as I love Henri Matisse, I think Beckmann has more juice for my taste.

Rail: I disagree, though I understand why you would feel that, but for me, and of course this is an aside, I think Matisse has the greatest capacity to take something and develop it in so many different directions. Beckmann had great power within one certain way of doing things. But his way of doing things did not have the plasticity Matisse gave it.

Ferrer: I take my statement back, and give you the corrected interpretation. I guess I was reacting in an impulsive way, which is very normal for me in conversation. In Beckmann, sex and narrative are always overt and blatant, right in your face. In Matisse, it is the eroticism of a bourgeois gentleman,

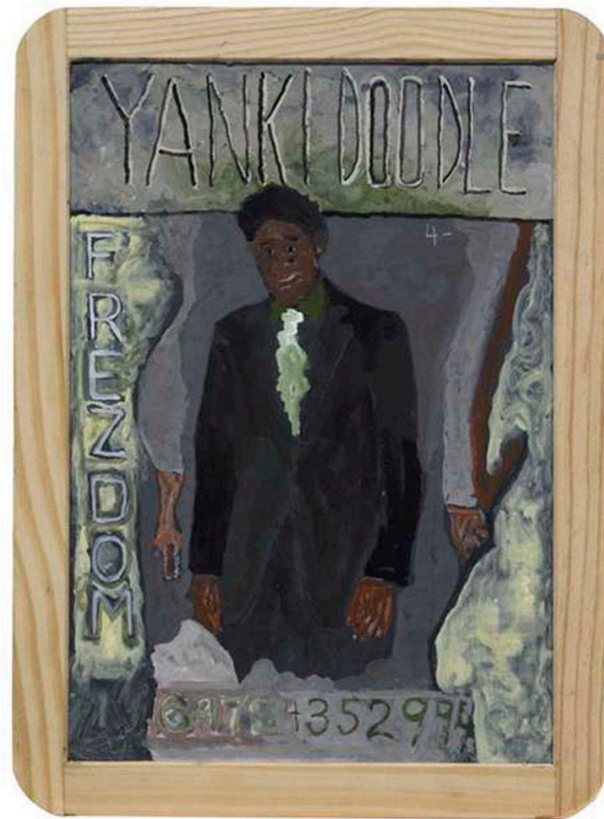
who above all, wants to maintain propriety. And that's the beef between Picasso and him. In any case, there are so many Matisses that I stand in front of and I cannot for my life understand how he left a painting in that condition, which is the only way it could be, to be the masterpiece that it is. To see a table that looks from the viewer's point of view as if it's flat, and then it has a fish bowl on it and its not falling off. I mean the whole composition is unexplainable. I just got back from Philadelphia and I visited the new installation of the Barnes Foundation, and let me tell you, if we're going to be talking about the power of people and artists and periods, it's impossible to overcome the fact that Paul Cézanne is unexplainable. I mean, you can't explain it. It's a most mysterious thing.

Rail: Yeah, I always think of Matisse when he was younger, when he was not having success and meeting a lot of resistance, to take courage he would say to himself, "If Cézanne is right, then I'm right."

Ferrer: Yes, that's right! And Picasso said he, Cézanne, was the father of us all. That's wonderful! I love that! And you know, that's a guy. Cézanne couldn't qualify for a show in today's world because he was antisocial, he was weird, he had a horrible temper. And he didn't suffer fools gladly.

Rail: When I hear the phrase, "doesn't suffer fools gladly," I have to think of you! You've recently had the retrospective of drawings, to which I was happy to contribute a catalogue essay. In recent years, I think you've been doing mostly works on paper: collages, drawings, and so on. Can you tell me a little bit about what you're working on now?

Ferrer: Well, right now, to get back to the first thing we spoke about, I think of the work I do as a kind of repertoire, where all of a sudden, there are things that give me a new avenue. For instance, I think it was a big breakthrough for me to come up with the small blackboards, which more than three people have said to me that I had imagined the iPad before it existed. I have to admit that it never entered my mind, but what they did give me was the capacity to use language in a very sly way. Meaning subversive language, throwing a sort of banana peel into the language by mixing images and stuff. The thing that I'm involved with now has to do with when I was living in Puerto Rico and was a musician. In the 1950s, there came to be a group the likes of which had never existed before. The bandleader was Rafael Cortijo and his singer was Ismael Rivera. Those two created a group that was spectacular. They had been my friends during the time I was growing up in Puerto Rico. They would come over to my house and we would jam together there, or late at night on the bridges of San Juan. The group really took shape while playing in a sailor's bar and whorehouse, called La Riviera, a huge nightclub by the docks in Old San Juan. So, this was the beginnings of a sensational group that eventually played at the Palladium in New York City. Both Tito Puente and Tito Rodriguez—who were big stars by then with great reputations—



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were completely blown away I saw when they came to hear them play. They saw not only the musical power in this band's arrangements, but the unique way they did their routines as they played. Ismael Rivera is a singer whose capacity for vocal improvisation remains unique in Afro-Caribbean musical history. The nucleus of the group still exists to this day—El Gran Combo de Puerto Rico. They have performed in every country in the world except China. Their leader, Rafael Ithier Nadal is now 86 years old and a dear friend of mine. What I have been doing for almost a year is hooking back up with my musician friends who are still alive. They are helping me in my search for images from that time when we were younger. From these images I'm making paintings. It's a labor of love.

Rail: I can't wait to see these paintings. Are they small?

Ferrer: Yes, they're small, like portraits. The most difficult thing is to find a photograph taken in action. Because I don't like posed pictures, which are inert. In the pictures taken while they're playing, the expressions on their faces remain alive and elusive.

Rail: But are they group portraits or individual?

Ferrer: At this point they're all individual but probably there will be some of groups. I'm going to Puerto Rico soon, to visit the families of two of my friends who are dead in search for more material from their scrapbooks, pictures while they were playing. That's my goal.

Rail: Well, as I said, I can't wait to see the paintings. Thanks very much. That sounds wonderful.

Ferrer: Yes, well it is, it's thrilling because I have been painting all my life to their music, music I know by heart, part of my memory. Curiously when I look at art or when I listen to music, I never seem to exhaust the endless revelations that make both things a continual source of inspiration.